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BY

MR. ELIHU ROOT

UPON THE UNVEILING OF A STATUE OF
PRESIDENT ARTHUR IN MADISON SQUARE,
NEW YORK, JUNE THIRTEENTH, 1899 ❀ ❀

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PLANTING

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Mr. Mayor :

The Committee of which Mr. Stewart is Chairman has charged me with the duty of formally presenting to the city of New York the statue of Chester Allan Arthur, the twenty-first President of the United States, now about to be unveiled.

The statue is the result of the contributions of President Arthur's personal associates and friends here in his home, who knew him as he was, and admired and loved him long before the world knew him, and who found in the universal esteem and admiration accorded to him by the whole people in his later years, not a revelation, but a recognition of his character and qualities. This memorial of our old fellow-townsmen is to stand appropriately in the New York of Arthur's day, in the square around which centered so much of the city's activity in his time, in front of the old Club House of the Union League, of which he was long

an active, and at the last an honorary member, and near the familiar pathway along which so many of us have passed with him on his way to and from his Lexington avenue home.

The personal relations which have prompted this expression of affection and esteem are rapidly lapsing into oblivion. The men and women who knew him, who felt the direct influence of his clear and bright intelligence, his commanding character, the sweetness and gentleness of his disposition, the rich stores of his cultivated mind, the grace and charm of his courtesy, his grave and simple dignity, and his loyal and steadfast friendship, are passing swiftly away. In but a few years more the joy he gave in living, the sharp sorrow of his untimely death, the treasured memories of his association and his friendship, will exist no longer in any human heart. He will be but a name on a page of American history, and his personality, potent as it

was in life, living as it is still in our hearts, will have ceased from its separate existence, and live only in the undistinguished immortality of effect in the life of the race. Were this all the story his memory might well be left to die with the dying. But there remains a record of national safety, achieved in a time of imminent peril by his noble qualities, his hard endurance, his self-sacrifice and patriotism; and it is right that this record of patriotic service should be preserved and continually recalled to the minds of generations to come by this statue of imperishable bronze standing upon the public land of the great city which gave him to the nation.

No greater peril ever menaced the constitutional government of the United States than that which confronted the American people when President Garfield fell by the hand of Guiteau on the 2d of July, 1881. External assaults consolidate a people and stimulate their loyalty to their institutions.

But when Garfield fell the danger came from within. The factional strife within the dominant party which resulted in the nomination of President Garfield had been of unprecedented bitterness. Vice-President Arthur had been selected from the defeated faction. He was one of its most conspicuous and active leaders. Stilled for a time during the canvass, the controversy was resumed with renewed vigor and more violent feelings in the early days of the new Administration. It extended through every State and city and hamlet. Suddenly the adherents of the murdered President saw the powers of government about to be transferred to the leader of their defeated adversaries, and that transfer effected by the act of an assassin. Many of them could not instantly accept the truth that it was the act solely of a half-crazed and disappointed seeker for office; many of them questioned whether the men who were to profit by the act

were not the instigators of it. It seemed beyond endurance that Garfield's enemies should profit by his death. Dark suspicions and angry threatenings filled the public mind, and for the moment there was doubt—grave doubt—and imminent peril that the orderly succession of power under the Constitution might not take its peaceful course. Under such conditions, acting upon the telegraphed request of the Cabinet, in order that the first step might be safely passed, Arthur took the oath of office at his home in Lexington avenue at midnight on the night when Garfield died, and entered upon the solemn duties of the Presidency. Surely no more lonely and pathetic figure was ever seen assuming the powers of government. He had no people behind him, for Garfield, not he, was the people's choice; he had no party behind him, for the dominant faction of his party hated his name—were enraged by his advancement, and distrusted his motives. He

had not even his own faction behind him, for he already knew that the just discharge of his duties would not accord with the ardent desires of their partisanship, and that disappointment and estrangement lay before him there. He was alone. He was bowed down by the weight of fearful responsibility and crushed to the earth by the feeling, exaggerated but not unfounded, that he took up his heavy burden surrounded by dislike, suspicion, distrust and condemnation as an enemy of the martyred Garfield and the beneficiary of his murder. Deep and settled melancholy possessed him; almost despair overwhelmed him. He went to power walking through the valley of the shadow of death, and ascended the steps of a throne as one who is accused goes to his trial.

Then came the revelation to the people of America that our ever-fortunate republic had again found the man for the hour. His actions were informed and guided by

absolute self-devotion to the loftiest conception of his great office. The solid substance of character inherited from his Scotch ancestry and his Vermont birth-place, and developed by the typical American training of the poor clergyman's son carving out his own fortune without any resources except those which rested within himself, made him master of himself and dependent only upon the dictates of his own judgment and his own conscience. His skill as a politician in the best sense, and his experience as an administrator, made him a judge of men and their motives, and enabled him to shun the pitfalls which encompass the feet of an unwary executive. His instinctive sympathy and chivalric regard for the memory and the purposes of the lamented Garfield disarmed resentment. The dignified courtesy of his manners and the considerate sincerity of his speech conciliated the friendship even of his enemies. The extremists of his

own party faction found that their demands for the fruits of revolution were addressed to one no longer a leader of a faction, but the President of the whole people, conscious of all his obligations, and determined to execute the people's will. The coldness, the alienation of old allies, the reproaches which they visited upon him, he suffered in silence and in sorrow, but with unchanged and steadfast determination. He was wise in statesmanship and firm and effective in administration. Honesty in national finance, purity and effectiveness in the civil service, the promotion of commerce, the re-creation of the American Navy, reconciliation between North and South, and honorable friendship with foreign nations, received his active support. Good causes found in him a friend, and bad measures met in him an unyielding opponent.

The genuineness of his patriotism, the integrity of his purpose and the wisdom of

his conduct, changed general distrust to universal confidence, re-established popular belief in the adequacy of our constitutional system in all emergencies, and restored an abiding trust in the perpetuity of our government. He himself greatly aided to make true the memorable words of his first inaugural:

“Men may die, but the fabrics of our free
institutions remain unshaken.”

The strain of that terrible ordeal and the concentrated and unremitting effort of those burdened years exhausted the vital forces of his frame and brought him to the grave in the meridian of his days. He gave his life to his country as truly as one who dies from wounds or disease in war.

With proud and sensitive reticence he had suffered much from calumny. Its completest refutation was the demonstration of what he was. And he was always the same. The noble form of which all America was proud as it bore with dignity

and flawless honor the chief magistracy of the greatest of republics was none other than the simple and true American gentleman who walked with us among our homes and to whose memory we offer this poor tribute.

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